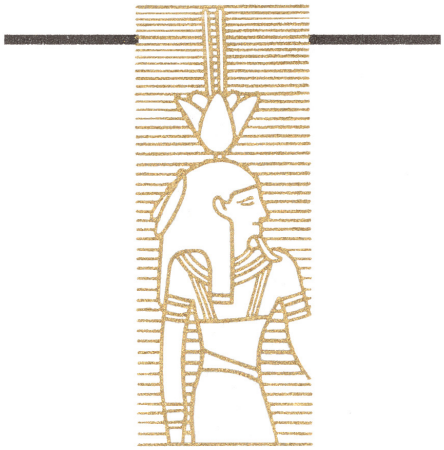
BARAKAT

MIRROR OF ALL AGES & CULTURES

SKULLS THROUGH HISTORY



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All our artefacts are guaranteed to be genuine and a certificate of authenticity is included with each item.

Introduction

The skull is the universal image of death and the afterlife. It is one of the most powerful images of the transitoriness of our human experience, and at the same time almost mystically embodies the concept of the afterlife.
While many of us may today think about death as the ultimate ending of the experience called life, the distinction was not as strong in antiquity.

In fact, for many ancient civilisations the concept of death did not signify simply an end, but rather a step that everyone must take to enter the underworld or the afterlife. Accepting the natural cycle of human life, those populations were not afraid to confront the concept of death. Indeed, the idea of life and death is often expressed in their art forms and constantly present in their daily life and rituals.

For example, in Meso-American cultures the skull was not intended as a macabre symbol, but as concomitant with life, existing side by side, the one essential to and nurturing the other.

The Maya, the Aztecs, and other cultures regarded the 'other world' as an integral part of the physical world, and that the barrier separating the two was like a revolving door. Since the afterlife is 'peopled' with spirits and deities, they must be honoured and given offerings so as to ensure their favourable help in the material world. Therefore, cults venerating and appeasing death flourished for centuries, and are still a fundamental part of many cultures. Skulls featured heavily in those cults and practices.

These magnificent artefacts grab our attention in an instant. They strike deeply into our primordial consciousness. Their unadorned power is elemental, forceful and penetrating.

The skull is the Universal image of death and the afterlife. Yet, in Meso-American culture it was not intended as a macabre symbol, but as concomitant with life, existing side by side, the one essential to and nurturing the other. Since the afterlife is 'peopled' with spirits and deities, they must be honoured and given offerings so as to ensure their favourable help in the material world. Cults dedicated to spirit appeasement ranged far and wide, and used skulls such as this beautiful example as part of ritual paraphernalia. Firstly, this skull is a work of art, skillfully rendered, being both very realistic and abstract, while exuding a powerful presence. A hollowed portion on top of its head was probably intended to hold ritual incense or liquid burned during ceremonies. The expression on this skull is more lifelike than skeletal, with a fantastic expression in the eyes that is forceful and defiant. Expert carving and magical intent has come together in lovely pink-white stone to make this skull a universal image of life.

Stone Sculpture of a Skull - PF.4266

Origin: Costa Rica
Circa: 300 BC to 500 AD
Dimensions: 4.5" (11.4cm) high x 4" (10.2cm) wide x 7.25" (18.4cm) depth

£4,000,000.00

Stone Skull Mask - PF.5825

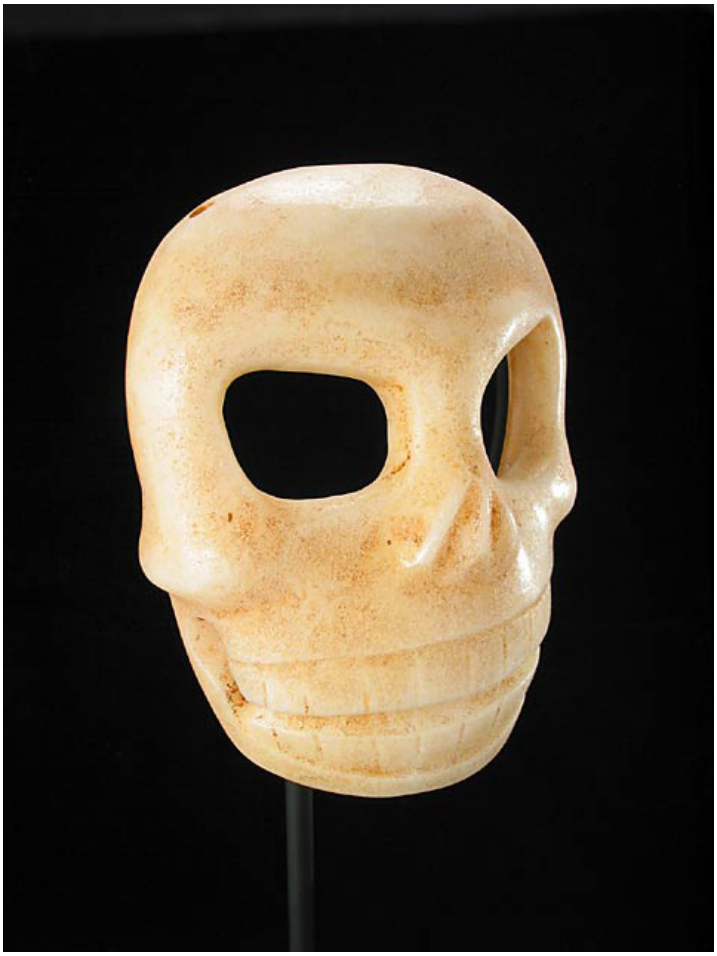
Origin: Costa Rica
Circa: 1st Century AD to 5th Century AD
Dimensions: 5.75" (14.6cm) high
Collection: Pre-Columbian

$68,000.00

The artist who created this fascinating stone skull mask was not only an exceptional lapidary artist, but his choice of material was also very perceptive. The stone is remarkably similar in colour and composition to the human skull, especially in regards to the vein formations and the general texture and feel. The artist may have gone through many quarries to find this special stone.

In general, Meso-Americans believed that the universe embraced the heavens and underworld as one. There was no separation between the terrestrial world and the realm of the supernatural. Everyday experience incorporated these two worlds together; it was a basic aspect of their reality. Thus, the world of the dead was closely integrated into the world of the living. Deceased ancestors were believed to have powerful influences upon the living.

Major festivals honoured the dead. Most likely, this mask represented the death deity and would have been worn in such an elaborate ceremony. By appeasing the death deity through ritual, the ancient Costa Ricans may have felt that their ancestors would be safe in the Underworld and in turn have favourable influences upon the living. Or perhaps, the death deity acted as an intermediary for the humans to communicate with the deceased. Due to their perception of the unity of the terrestrial worlds and the Underworld as one, we can only imagine that this mask and the ritual performances in honour of the death deity had good intentions for all: the gods, humans and the dead.



Guanacaste-Nicoya Stone Skull Mask - PF.3529

Origin: Guanacaste, Nicoya, Costa Rica
Circa: 100 AD to 500 AD
Dimensions: 5.5" (14.0cm) high
Collection: Pre-Columbian

£60,000.00

Carved of a light beige stone, this skull mask is captivating. The surface colour and texture of the mask resembles the real human bone, creating more mysterious and unforgettable image and essence. Its large hollow eyes and the high cheekbones show distinct physical structure, which add to the realistic portrayal of the skull. The mouth is open wide to display the intricately rendered teeth. In addition to the four small holes around the mask, both ends of the teeth by the jaws are hollowed out, perhaps for a significant functional or a symbolic purpose. Conveying the idea of death and after-life, this mask most likely was created as a ritual offering or as a funerary mask.

The concept of death did not mean the end for Ancient Meso-Americans but a step that everyone must take to enter the underworld and the after-life. Accepting the natural cycle of human life, Meso-Americans were not afraid to confront the concept of death. Incorporated in their daily life and rituals, the idea of life and death are often expressed in their art forms. This magnificent mask grabs our attention in an instant. As we contemplate the artwork, we are invited to confront the inevitable idea of life and death, and we are reminded of an ancient culture and its images that flourished hundreds of years ago.

Green Stone Skull Mask - CK.0691

Origin: Costa Rica
Circa: 100 AD to 500 AD
Dimensions: 7" (17.8cm) high x 5.125" (13.0cm) wide
Collection: Pre-Columbian

$33,000.00

In general, Pre-Columbian Meso-Americans believed that the universe embraced the heavens and underworld as one. There was no separation between the terrestrial world and the realm of the supernatural. Everyday experience incorporated these two worlds together; it was a basic aspect of their reality. Thus, the world of the dead was closely integrated into the world of the living. Deceased ancestors were believed to have powerful influences upon the living.

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The belief that death is a crucial element in the continuation of life is a belief shared by many Meso-American people. The Maya and Aztecs both regarded the 'other world' as an integral part of the physical world, and that the barrier separating the two was like a revolving door. Therefore, cults venerating and appeasing death flourished for centuries, and are still a fundamental part of many cultures. This remarkable sculpture of a skull strikes deeply into our primordial consciousness. Its unadorned power is elemental, forceful and penetrating. The delicate carving of the face and handsome modelling of the head is complimented by the stone's natural colour, which is luminescent as alabaster and white as a lily. It is easy to imagine this skull being a dramatic and practical part in esoteric rituals long since forgotten, but still alive in the aura of the stone.

Mayan Stone Skull - SP.457

Origin: Guatemala
Circa: 200 AD to 600 AD
Dimensions: 7.5" (19.1cm) high

$120,000.00

Atlantic Watershed Jade Mace Head in the Form of a Skull - PF.2243

Origin: Eastern Costa Rica
Circa: 300 BC to 300 AD
Dimensions: 3.375" (8.6cm) high
Collection: Pre-Columbian

$36,000.00

This ancient carved mace head, whose form derives from a weapon of war, was probably carries in a ceremonial capacity by a clan or group. With abstract power, it depicts a shouting human head, perhaps a symbol of strength in battle. Carried atop a staff or pole, it would have designated earthly status among the tribes of Ancient Costa Rica. Even after the passage of centuries, it radiates an awesome power that captures our attention and holds us riveted.

Guanacaste-Nicoya Terracotta Skull Mask - PF.3779

Origin: Guanacaste, Nicoya, Costa Rica
Circa: 100 AD to 500 AD
Dimensions: 8" (20.3cm) high

$26,000.00

This jade skill pectoral may represent either a human skull or that of a monkey. It may have been worn during religious rituals symbolizing immortality and the passage through life. Its simple carved rendering has a powerful harmonious presence that can not escape the beholder. The perforations on the chin indicate that something has hung from both sides, possibly feathers or gold. Jade was often used in burials and offerings and assumed mystical qualities.

Jade Skull Mask Pectoral - PF.2801

Origin: Costa Rica
Circa: 100 AD to 500 AD
Dimensions: 4.5" (11.4cm) high

$136,000.00

Obsidian Skull - PH.0292

Circa: 300 AD to 600 AD
Dimensions: 8" (20.3cm) high x 7" (17.8cm) wide

$33,000.00

Green Stone Skull - SP.459

Origin: Mexico
Circa: 200 AD to 700 AD
Dimensions: 6" (15.2cm) high x 7" (17.8cm) wide
Collection: Pre-Columbian

$360,000.00

The belief that death is a crucial element in the continuation of life is a belief shared by many Meso-American people. The Maya and Aztec both regarded the 'other world' as an integral part of the physical world, and that the barrier separating the two was like a revolving door. Therefore, cults venerating and appeasing death flourished for centuries, and are still a fundamental part of many cultures. This remarkable sculpture of a skull strikes deeply into our primordial consciousness. Its unadorned power is elemental, forceful and penetrating. The delicate carving of the face and handsome modelling of the head is complimented by the stone's natural colour, It is easy to imagine this skull being a dramatic and practical part in esoteric rituals long since forgotten, but still alive in the aura of the stone.

The Classic Maya period was an age of profound intellectual and artistic achievements, when the Maya built monumental pyramids and magnificent urban centers in homage to their gods. At a time when the Western world languished after the fall of the Roman Empire, the New World experienced an age of imperial grandeur, when great city-states like Tikal and Copán proclaimed Mayan hegemony over the emerald forests of Mexico and Guatemala. Theirs was a sophisticated but startlingly brutal civilization—wars were waged not for land or prestige, but for blood, for slaves sacrificed atop the great pyramids to appease the god's insatiable lust for human flesh. The Mayan world was an arcane realm where the earth was contiguous with the heavens and the underworld. It was a society infused with spiritualism, a society that reflected both the majesty and savagery of the rain forests. Like the ancient societies of the Mediterranean, ceramic forms were vital to the Mayan economy and traded alongside coveted resources such as Jade, obsidian, flint, and shells. The Maya believed the universe was divided into three parts: the Over world (heaven), the Middle world (the world of humankind), and the Underworld (hell). All three were considered interconnected and accessible through "doorways", or through Shamanic ritual. It was believed the Underworld could be entered through a cave or through bodies of standing water, such as a lake or ocean. To comprehend the nature of these three worlds and the beings that inhabit them was important to daily life of Maya society.
Mayan art was composed of a complex symbolic language with deeply important social functions. Mainly commissioned by kings and other elite figures, works of Mayan art fulfilled both political and social purposes. Because the art functioned as a type of language, to be understood by the entire population, a certain consistency in subject matter and its portrayal was necessary. Whether on a cylinder vessel or a great mural, Maya art essentially depicts ritual. The impressive Maya ceremonies, recorded for posterity in their art, were crucial events in the lives of the kings, and consequently important to society as a whole. In Maya believe, an actual ritual ceremony is directly connected with the art which represents it; both conceived of as a power process that transformed spiritual beings into corporeal beings on the human level, and allowed people and objects to become the sacred beings they represented.

In the 9th and 10th centuries AD, the productivity of the southern regions went into decline for reasons that are still uncertain (although ecological causes are the likeliest option), although the northern areas continued to flourish on a reduced scale until the arrival of European forces and the subsequent decimation of Native American cultures across both continents. What is left, however – particularly dating to the Classic Period – includes art and other achievements that many consider to be the most refined and beautiful of the ancient New World. Stucco, mural painting (notably with the use of "Maya Blue", the secret of which has been lost since the 16th century) and sculpture were all of an astounding quality and naturalism, with some sophisticated expressionistic tendencies.

Carved out of hardened lava, this powerful sculpture depicts a skull with detailed zig-zag design patterns on the crown and obverse of the cranial structure.

Mayan Stone Skull - CK.0815

Circa: 300 AD to 900 AD
Dimensions: 6.5" (16.5cm) high x 5" (12.7cm) wide x 7.5" (19.1cm) depth

$24,000.00

Mayan Basalt Skull - CK.0298

Origin: Honduras
Circa: 500 AD to 900 AD
Dimensions: 8.5" (21.59cm) high x 7" (17.78cm) wide x 7.5" (23.49cm) depth

$36,000.00

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The belief that death is a crucial element in the continuation of life is a belief shared by many Meso-American people. The Maya and Aztecs both regarded the 'other world' as an integral part of the physical world, and that the barrier separating the two was like a revolving door. Therefore, cults venerating and appeasing death flourished for centuries, and are still a fundamental part of many cultures. This remarkable sculpture of an animal's skull strikes deeply into our primordial consciousness. Its unadorned power is elemental, forceful and penetrating. The delicate carving of the face and handsome modelling of the head is complimented by the stone's natural colour, which is luminescent as alabaster and white as a lily. The hollowed out portion at the top of the head was probably meant to hold ritual ingredients, either dried herbs as incense or various liquids. A canal leading from this 'cup' seems to have been intended for drainage. It is easy to imagine this skull being a dramatic and practical part in esoteric rituals long since forgotten, but still alive in the aura of the stone.

Stone Sculpture of a Skull - PF.4752

Origin: Costa Rica
Circa: 500 AD to 1000 AD
Dimensions: 10.25" (26.0cm) high

$480,000.00

In the context of Pre-Columbian art and archaeology, jade is a generic term that refers to any variety of hard, dense stones that were worked with great skill by native artists. Although jade is generally thought to be green, it can actually be a range of colours. Jade carving flourished in ancient Costa Rica for over a thousand years, roughly from 500 B.C. to 900 A.D., although the period of greatest artistic accomplishment lasted from 300 to 700 A.D. It is believed that jade working began during an extended period of agricultural abundance that allowed the ancient society to dedicate part of its energies toward the cultivation of artistic pursuits.

Jade was considered to be a sacred material by the ancient populations of Costa Rica, held in even higher esteem than gold. Generally, it was thought to symbolize that vital life force that sustains us all. The colour green is naturally associated with verdant plant life. Specifically, jade was thought to symbolize the sprouting maize plant, that staple of the Pre-Columbian diet. It has also been suggested that jade represents water. Either way, we can be certain that jade represented the very essence of life itself.

To date, no native sources of jade have been discovered in Costa Rica, suggesting an extended trade network existed that imported this precious resource from Meso-America into Costa Rica where it was carved by local artists. Such trade also would have brought great wealth and likely reinforced the social stratification of the peoples. Jade may have served as a status marker to distinguish the elite from the masses and solidify their hold on power. We can picture an ancient ruler or shaman presiding over a sacred ceremonial adorned in brilliant green jade pendants and jewellery. The ancient Costa Ricans believe that the system of social hierarchy also extended into the afterlife. Therefore, jade objects were buried with the elite so that their power could be maintained throughout eternity.

Jade Skull Mask - CK.0718

Origin: Costa Rica
Circa: 500 AD to 1000 AD
Dimensions: 6.25" (15.9cm) high x 4.5" (11.4cm) wide
Collection: Pre-Columbian

$90,000.00

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Mayan Terracotta Skull - SP.629

Circa: 500 AD to 900 AD
Dimensions: 4.25" (10.8cm) high

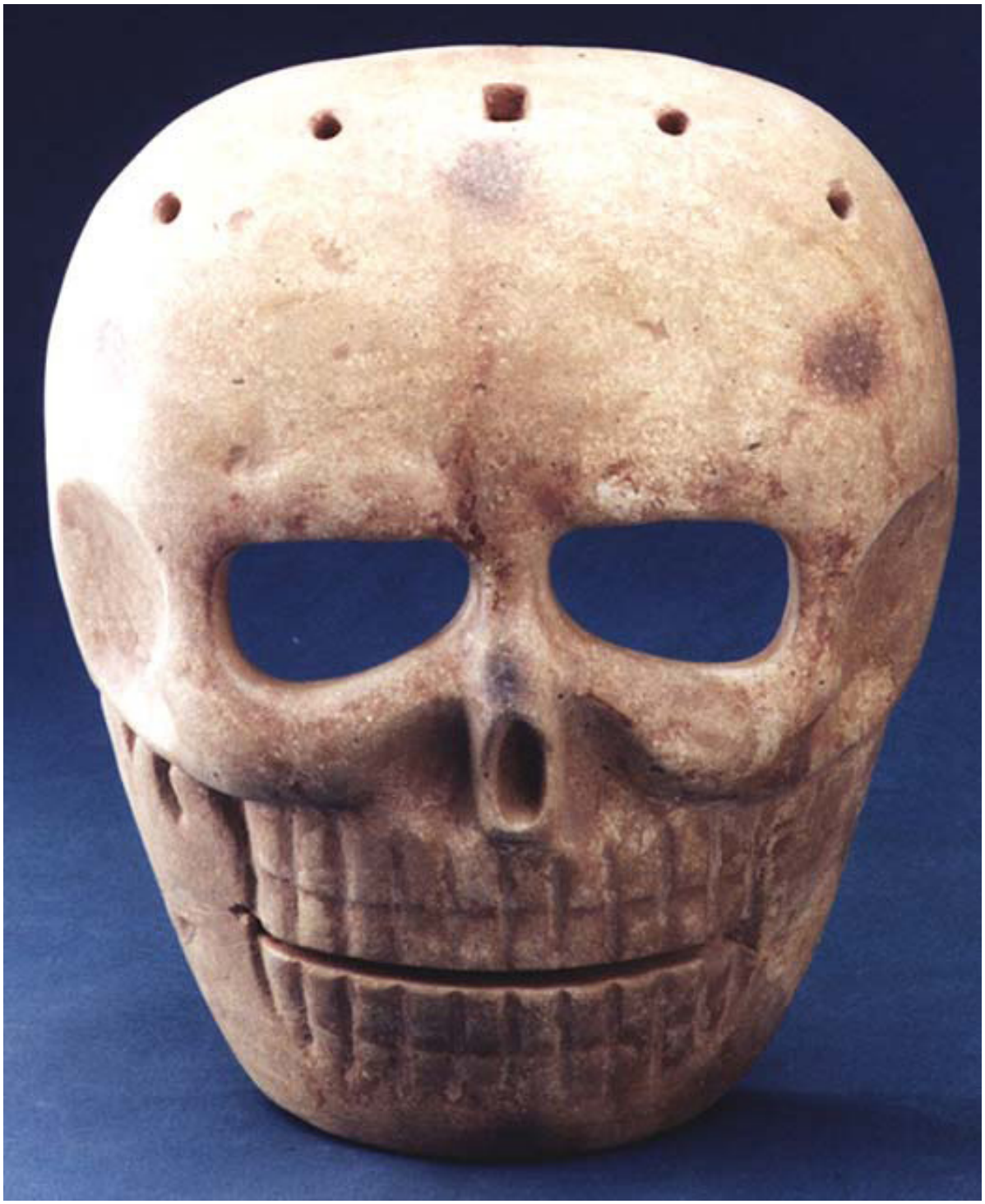
$7,500.00

The Maya in their great temple cities reached the summit of classical age in Ancient Meso-America. In those temple cities, great artistic expressions such as murals and sculptures flourished. It is during this classical period in which artists refined their skills to represent the human forms, deities, and other symbolic art works. Used in various rituals and ceremonies, their art embodied rich symbolism, laden with complex meanings that largely remain esoteric. A fine example of the magnificent Mayan sculpture, this terracotta sculpture depicts a dramatic image of a skull. Sculpted in beige colour similar to the colour of the human bone, the skull is fairly realistic. The hollowness of the skull can be seen through the open eye sockets and the sunken eyes accentuate the high cheekbones that cast a gentle shadow. The intricately rendered teeth seem very natural, adding to the realistic feel of the skull portraying the concept of death. Ancient Mayans firmly believed in life, death, rebirth, and afterlife. Even after death, they believed that people experience rebirth following their journey through the underworld. Accepting the natural cycle of human life, the Ancient Mayans were not afraid to confront the concept of death. Incorporated in their daily life and rituals, the idea of life and death are often expressed in various art forms. Possibly used in rituals or created as a ritual offering, this magnificent sculpture grabs our attention in an instant. As we look into the artwork, we are invited to confront the inevitable idea of life and death, and we are reminded of an ancient culture and its images that flourished hundreds of years ago.

Mayan Sculpture of a Skull - PF.3600

Origin: Guatemala
Circa: 500 AD to 900 AD
Dimensions: 6.875" (17.5cm) high x 5" (12.7cm) wide

$7,600.00



The mask, as a basic artistic and religious concept, helps us to visualize the invisible. In ancient cultures the mask had many functions- as entertainment, as symbols of life and death, and the personification of spirits. Masks rarely depict humans realistically, though they often have human features. They are an artistic creation that, when imbued with sufficient energy, can act as a sort of bridge between the wearer and the supernatural world. This superb funerary mask shows the most elemental and widely understood symbol of death- the skull. Yet, it is much more than a representation of the cessation of life. Placed in a tomb of a wealthy or noble person, this mask may have been seen more as a beginning than an end, the start of a great journey into an afterlife as rich and varied as the physical existence. The sheer volume and massive strength of this mask attests to the sculptor's great skill, which knew how to refine details with elegance, grace and simplicity, without losing any of its power and presence. Viewing such an object is like being part of an Ancient culture that understood many mysteries of life, and allows us a glimpse through our own imagination into their world.

Stone Funerary Skull Mask - PF.3453

Origin: Costa Rica
Circa: 500 AD to 1000 AD
Dimensions: 15" (38.1cm) high

$90,000.00

Costa Rican Stone Ceremonial Axe Topped by a Skull - SP.503

Circa: 500 AD to 1000 AD
Dimensions: 10.5" (26.7cm) high

$48,000.00

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Stone Funerary Skull Mask - PF.4475

Origin: Costa Rica
Circa: 500 AD to 1000 AD
Dimensions: 18.75" (47.6cm) high

$120,000.00

Stone heads played a crucial role in cult rituals in Ancient Costa Rica. Made of solid stone, they were an ominous force and even today, they seem to have a generally foreboding quality. The red rivulets displayed, suggest the use of cinnabar during the ritual act. To have the teeth showing, heightens its forbidding nature but also lends itself to curiosity. Though we cannot be exact in our information concerning the ritual behind this work, we can feel a latent power and strength within the piece that the artist has created, and thus feel a reverence and respect to both art and its creator.

Guanacaste-Nicoya Stone Sculpture of a Skull - PF.3719

Origin: Guanacaste, Nicoya, Costa Rica
Circa: 500 AD to 1000 AD
Dimensions: 11" (27.9cm) high

$60,000.00

The Toltec civilization first gained ascendany in the Valley of Mexico around 900 A.D., after the fall of Teotihuacan. Although their origins and early history are obscure, the Toltecs appear to have ancient ties to both the Mixtec and the Zapotec. The word Toltec means "master builders" in the Nahuatl language, a testament to the sophistication of Toltec constructions. Their art and architecture was highly influenced by Teotihuacan as well as the ancient Olmec culture. The Toltecs were technologically advanced, capable of smelting metals. Their stonework was impeccable as the ruins of Tula demonstrate. This archaeological site is believed to be Tollan, the legendary capital of the Toltec civilization referred to in a number of postconquest sources. Their social structure was headed by an elite class of warriors. Excavation have uncovered the ceremonial center that included a pyramid structure topped by a temple dedicated to the hero-god Quetzalcoatl.

This stunning Toltec vessel, known as plumbate ware, is distinguished by its attractive glassy luster, which was produced by covering the vessel in a slip high in iron and aluminum content and then firing the pot at high temperatures. Greatly prized as a luxury item, plumbate vessels such as this formed a unique component in the repertoire of Meso-American art. During the height of the Toltec civilization, plumbate works were produced at only one place: on the Pacific slope of the Soconusco region in modern Guatemala. Furthermore, the process by which it was made seems to have been a closely guarded secret. Such wares were highly valued throughout Meso-America and were traded along commercial networks that extended as far as Panama. Plumbate was so desirable in part because it maintains an exceptional hardness that can be scarcely scratched with steel.

We comprehend, however dimly, when we look at this stark, grinning skull that it has been witness to some dark and secret ritual. It is powerful, even frightening, an unblinking reminder of death. It is perhaps a moment before we remember that it is a clay object that never had an independent life of its own, and that it represents an ape, not a human. Still, caught up in its mystery, we wonder what it could tell us if it could speak.

Toltec Plumbate Vessel in the form of an Ape Skull - PF.0414

Origin: Soconusco, Guatemala
Circa: 600 AD to 900 AD
Dimensions: 5" (12.7cm) high

$16,800.00

Mayan Lava Skull - CK.0166

Origin: Honduras
Circa: 600 AD to 900 AD
Dimensions: 7" (17.8cm) high x 4.25" (10.8cm) wide x 7.25" (18.4cm) depth

$40,000.00

he Classic Maya period was an age of profound intellectual and artistic achievements, when the Maya built monumental pyramids and magnificent urban centers in homage to their gods. At a time when the Western world languished after the fall of the Roman Empire, the New World experienced an age of imperial grandeur, when great city-states like Tikal and Copán proclaimed Mayan hegemony over the emerald forests of Mexico and Guatemala. Theirs was a sophisticated but startlingly brutal civilization— wars were waged not for land or prestige, but for blood, for slaves sacrificed atop the great pyramids to appease the god's insatiable lust for human flesh. The Mayan world was an arcane realm where the earth was contiguous with the heavens and the underworld. It was a society infused with spiritualism, a society that reflected both the majesty and savagery of the rain forests. Like the ancient societies of the Mediterranean, ceramic forms were vital to the Mayan economy and traded alongside coveted resources such as Jade, obsidian, flint, and shells.

The Maya believed the universe was divided into three parts: the Over world (heaven), the Middle world (the world of humankind), and the Underworld (hell). All three were considered interconnected and accessible through "doorways", or through Shamanic ritual. It was believed the Underworld could be entered through a cave or through bodies of standing water, such as a lake or ocean. To comprehend the nature of these three worlds and the beings that inhabit them was important to daily life of Maya society.

Mayan art was composed of a complex symbolic language with deeply important social functions. Mainly commissioned by kings and other elite figures, works of Mayan art fulfilled both political and social purposes. Because the art functioned as a type of language, to be understood by the entire population, a certain consistency in subject matter and its portrayal was necessary. Whether on a cylinder vessel or a great mural, Maya art essentially depicts ritual. The impressive Maya ceremonies, recorded for posterity in their art, were crucial events in the lives of the kings, and consequently important to society as a whole. In Maya believe, an actual ritual ceremony is directly connected with the art which represents it; both conceived of as a power process that transformed spiritual beings into corporeal beings on the human level, and allowed people and objects to become the sacred beings they represented.

In the 9th and 10th centuries AD, the productivity of the southern regions went into decline for reasons that are still uncertain (although ecological causes are the likeliest option), although the northern areas continued to flourish on a reduced scale until the arrival of European forces and the subsequent decimation of Native American cultures across both continents. What is left, however – particularly dating to the Classic Period – includes art and other achievements that many consider to be the most refined and beautiful of the ancient New World. Stucco, mural painting (notably with the use of "Maya Blue", the secret of which has been lost since the 16th century) and sculpture were all of an astounding quality and naturalism, with some sophisticated expressionistic tendencies.

Carved out of hardened lava, this powerful sculpture depicts a skull. Based on the shaped of the skull and some of the cranial features, it is possible that it might represent that of a monkey.

The summit of the classical age in Ancient Meso-America was reached by the Maya in their great temple cities. In those temple cities, great artistic expressions such as murals and sculptures flourished. It is during this classical period in which artists refined their skills to represent human form and deities. Used in various rituals and ceremonies, their art embodied rich symbolism. This remarkably sculpted terracotta mask reveals Mayan attributes and symbolism in a dramatic manner. Its beige colour of the surface suggesting the colour of human bone, the mask carries an impressionable expression. The furrowing eyebrows, bulging eyes in deep eye-sockets, and the high cheekbones accentuated by the open mouth showing teeth expresses the idea of death and the underworld. Perhaps it represents life and death, as ancient Meso-Americans believed in rebirth after death. Two small holes are located on the top of the mask for its functional use; perhaps the mask was used in funerary rituals or was placed on the face of the deceased. Not only does the mask's expressive power delight our eyes but it also affects our emotions.

Mayan Terracotta Mask with Skull Features - PF.3554

Origin: Guatemala
Circa: 6th Century AD to 9th Century AD
Dimensions: 7.5" (19.1cm) high

$8,600.00

The artist who created this fascinating skull terracotta vessel was not only a fine sculptor; he was also very perceptive in the type of glaze he chose for the vessel. It is a white glaze that is similar to human skulls. It has a remarkable realistic human resemblance. This person most probably desired this vessel to represent the death deity for rituals. In general, the Meso-Americans believed the universe embraced the heavens and underworld as one. There was no separation between the terrestrial world and the supernatural world. Everyday experience incorporated these two worlds together; it was an ordinary aspect of their reality. Thus, the world of the dead was closely integrated into the world of the living. Deceased ancestors were believed to have powerful influences upon the living. Major festivals honoured the dead. The person who used this vessel during rituals most probably acted as the death deity. By appeasing the death deity through ritual, the ancient Costa Ricans may have felt that their ancestors would be safe in the Underworld and have favourable influences upon the living. Or perhaps the death deity acted as an intermediary for the humans to communicate with the deceased. Due to their perception of the unity of the terrestrial, supernatural worlds and the Underworld as one, we can only imagine that this vessel played an important part in rituals in honour of the death deity who had good intentions for all: the gods, humans and the dead.

Terracotta Skull Vessel With Spout - PF.3956

Origin: Costa-Rica
Circa: 800 AD to 1200 AD
Dimensions: 8.25" (21.0cm) high

£60,000.00

Taino Stone Trigonolitos Depicting a Skull - LO.1320

Origin: Dominican Republic
Circa: 1000 AD to 1500 AD
Dimensions: 8.5" (21.6cm) high x 9" (22.9cm) wide

£75,000.00

This Taino three-pointer or 'trigonolitos' is incredibly rare and unusual in terms of its design. These triangular carved stones were unique to the people of the Caribbean, and have a long history that predates the Taino efflorescence, c. 1200-1500. Plain, undecorated examples have been dated as early as c.400-200 BC. 'Taino' is the term applied to a group of agricultural communities, ruled by hereditary chieftains (*caciques*). Culturally they were the most sophisticated people of the Caribbean until their way of life was tragically destroyed by the Spanish settlers at the end of the fifteenth century. Although they left no written records, a wide range of physical artefacts survive and testify to extremely high standards of craftsmanship. These skills were utilized in the service of religion and images of Taino gods and spirits (*zemis*) were carved in wood, shell, bone and stone. The majority of the three-pointers depict a skull-like face or a recognizably zoomorphic form. In contrast this example is far more abstract and iconographically intriguing.

The artist was clearly spellbound by his/her material, and the dark green stone, flecked with black, has been highly polished. The majority of the surface is unadorned but a deeply carved geometric motif enlivens one side. The surface of the stone within this design has been deliberately left with a coarser surface, resulting in an effective contrast of textures. The almost clover-shaped motif may well represent a stylized animal, especially when viewed in conjunction with the lightly incised oval above. This forms part of a band of geometric motifs that runs around the top part of the central point. The symbolism of this cone shape has been hotly debated, with suggestions ranging from the manioc shoot (the main Taino crop) to the human breast. Some association with power and/or fertility seems likely and is confirmed by the testimony of Columbus himself, 'Equally the majority of *caciques* have three stones to which they and their people have great devotion. One they say is for the fertility of the grain and vegetables that they grow; the next for mothers to give birth without pain, and the third for the water and sun when they have need.' Although their precise function remains a mystery, these ritual objects still astound us with their abstract form and bold design. The rarity of this particular motif will be of especial interest to any serious collector in this fascinating field.

Taino Stone Trigonolitos Depicting a Skull - LO.1319

Origin: Dominican Republic
Circa: 1000 AD to 1500 AD
Dimensions: 9.8" (24.9cm) high x 9.5" (24.1cm) wide

£65,000.00

Three-pointers ('trigonolitos') were triangular- shaped stones that played a central role in the religious culture of the Taino. Flourishing in the Caribbean c.1200-1500, these communities were the first to be seriously affected by Spanish colonists in the late fifteenth century. The destruction brought about by the settlers makes the reconstruction of the Taino way of life problematic but not impossible. Hereditary chieftains (*caciques*) ruled over agricultural communities who were also skilled navigators and canoeists. Religiously, the Taino worshipped a variety of deities, or *zemis*, who were believed to control the elements. The most important were the supreme god or creator called Yucahu Maorocoti and a fertility goddess called Attabeira. Ancestor worship was also fundamental and chieftains were often deified after their death. Crucially, the Taino believed in the existence of an afterlife and the bones of deceased ancestors were treated with veneration. Although burial practices seem to have differed from island to island, Spanish records testify that bones were often hung in gourds from the rafters of Taino dwellings. This type of practice may account for the emphasis on skeletal forms that is evident across the whole spectrum of Taino art.

This carving is a case in point, featuring a skull-like face with a protruding forehead, deep eye-sockets and a small nose. The proportions of the face are deliberately manipulated and dominated by the wide grimacing mouth/jaw. The protruding ear-like sections are deeply carved and geometric in form. In contrast, the symmetrical geometric designs on the reverse are very lightly incised, and consist of four coils set around an irregular oval. This type of motif may recall Taino textiles or tattoos worn by high status individuals. The stone itself is particularly fine, of a dark brown/green hue with black flecks. The central point of the triangular form is unusually tall in relation to the rest of the piece. Although there have been many hypotheses as to the meaning of this shape, it clearly has some association with power and/or fertility. Columbus himself gives an eye-witness account to this affect, 'Equally the majority of *caciques* have three stones to which they and their people have great devotion. One they say is for the fertility of the grain and vegetables that they grow; the next for mothers to give birth without pain, and the third for the water and sun when they have need.' Although quite a large number of three-pointers have survived owing to the durability of the material, it is hard to find examples of such quality and expression.

Among the most abundant of artefacts attributed to the Pre-Columbian indigenous Taíno peoples, who populated the Bahamas, Antilles, and Lesser Antilles, zemi three-pointer stones are revered for their unusual triangulated shape, cone-shaped apex and elaborate patterns. Zemis are often defined as everything which possesses magical powers, including deities and even skeletal remains. In fact, souls of the deceased were also identified as zemis. Although many three-pointers are undecorated, this green stone sculpture is carved with an anthropomorphic image on the anterior and circular, maze-like motifs resembling reptilian coils on the posterior end. These characteristics are indicative of a Type I 'wrapped snake' three-pointer, however what is particularly interesting is that most three-pointers that are incised with reptilian coils are often paired with a reptilian face. In this case, the face resembles that of a human with a wide, opened mouth that seems tilted upwards, and large hollowed out eyes. The mouth and nose that are tilted to resemble Type III three-pointers. His chin is also ornamented by the reptilian coils, which extend around the perimeter of his face as well.

This green three-pointer combines human and animal traits, which convey not only an aura of strength but also a trance-like state aroused by a shaman's hallucinogens. The function of such artefacts is still hotly disputed. Many Taíno scholars conclude that three-pointers were buried as fertility charms in conucos or manioc mounds and even in shrines with other zemis. These figures might also be physical articulations of the Taíno mythological legacy. Yet, there remains much doubt over the use of less intricately decorated three-pointers as fertility charms. Letters written by Christopher Columbus suggest that these stone sculptures were created to fertilize the land and encourage fertility amongst its inhabitants. Today, these sculptures offer a unique insight into the religious lives of the Taino and impress us with the boldness of their design.

Taino Greenstone Trigonolitos Depicting a Skull - DC.1879

Origin: Dominican Republic
Circa: 1100 AD to 1500 AD
Dimensions: 7" (17.8cm) high x 5.5" (14.0cm) wide x 11" (27.9cm) depth
Collection: Pre-Columbian

$80,000.00

Taino Stone Trigonolitos Depicting a Skull - LO.1317

Origin: Dominican Republic
Circa: 1200 AD to 1500 AD
Dimensions: 7.5" (19.1cm) high x 10" (25.4cm) wide
Collection: Pre-Columbian

£60,000.00

Taino culture flourished in the Caribbean between c.1200-1500. The arrival of the Spanish in 1492 resulted in its rapid decline but objects such as this striking trigonolitos, also known as a three-pointer, testify to high levels of craftsmanship. The Taino left no written language so our knowledge about them derives solely from archaeology and the testimonials of the Spanish settlers. As a result, although significant numbers of three-pointers survive, their precise function within Taino society is unclear. The central cone of these triangular objects has been interpreted in a variety of ways. Suggestions include manioc shoots (one of the main crops of the Taino), volcanoes, the roofs of Taino houses, phalluses and the human breast. None of these theories has been universally accepted and the precise origins of the shape are likely to remain a mystery. Despite this many scholars agree that these ceremonial objects were symbols of power and fertility. This seems to be supported by a letter written by Columbus in which he reports on his findings among the Taino, 'Equally the majority of *caciques* (chiefs) have three stones to which they and their people have great devotion. One they say is for the fertility of the grain and vegetables that they grow; the next for mothers to give birth without pain, and the third for the water and sun when they have need.' Three-pointers were made in various sizes and have a long history that predates the Taino fluorescence. Small examples with minimal decoration have been dated to c.400-200 BC. However anthropomorphic examples such as this one, with intricate incised decoration, played a crucial part in Taino public life. As Columbus' testimony implies they were the preserve of the ruling elite and their ownership was synonymous with power.

One end of this piece has been carved in the form of a skull with large eye sockets and a broad jaw. The reverse has been incised with an abstract geometric design, including symmetrically arranged concentric circles. Symmetry is a recurring feature in Taino art and may have had religious significance. The Taino believed in the existence of a supreme god or creator called Yucahu Maorocoti and a fertility goddess called Attabeira. Ancestor worship was also fundamental to their belief system. Images of the gods and spirits were created in wood, bone, shell and stone and are referred to collectively as zemis. This example clearly had spiritual associations for its first owner and our inability to define them closely only contributes to its sense of mystery.

Taino Stone Mortar Bowl - PH.0216

Origin: Dominican Republic
Circa: 1200 AD to 1500 AD
Dimensions: 3.5" (8.9cm) high x 7" (17.8cm) wide x 14" (35.6cm) depth

£18,000.00

The Taíno were an ethnic group of Arawak people, who were the indigenous people of the Caribbean. At the time of European contact in the late 15th century, the Taíno were the principal inhabitants of most of Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola (Dominican Republic and Haiti), and Puerto Rico. Taíno spirituality centered on the worship of zemís, which are deities or ancestral spirits. Bones or skulls were often incorporated into sculptures of zemis. Zemis would also be consulted for advice and healing. During these consultation ceremonies, images of the zemi could be painted or tattooed on the body of priests. Zemis were generally sculpted from a wide variety of materials including bone, clay, wood, shell, sandstone and stone. They have been found in Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and other Caribbean islands. Some are quite large, up to 1 meter in height. Some could be effigies of birds, snakes, alligators and other animals, but mostly are human effigies. It is believed that the Taíno people hid their ceremonial objects in caves, away from the Spanish, or destroyed them as to avoid having them fall into Spanish hands.

Aztec Jade Skull - CK.0845

Circa: 1300 AD to 1500 AD
Dimensions: 5.25" (13.3cm) high x 4" (10.2cm) wide x 7.5" (19.1cm) depth

$360,000.00

The Aztec civilization is perhaps the most celebrated of the ancient Meso-American cultures. Their empire stretched throughout northern Mexico and was surpassed in size only by that of the Incans. Tenochtitlan (modern- day Mexico City) was the center of their religious and political systems. The city was composed of a group of island located in the center of Lake Texcoco, earning it the nickname "Venice of the New World." By the time the Spanish Conquistadors arrived in the early 16th Century, led by the infamous Hernan Cortes, Tenochtitlan was by far larger than any city they could have seen in Europe. Today, the Aztec are remembered for their grand temple complex ruins, for their intricate calendar system, and for the few examples of their art that survive today. Aztec art was primarily ecclesiastical and is renowned for its powerful nature. Highly adept at working with stone, the Aztec artists created artworks that were both grand in scale, as evidenced in their temple architecture, and relatively small in size. Like many cultures, the Aztecs believed that many animals had supernatural symbolic associations. Therefore, although the Aztec gods were usually visualized in human form, most gods also had animal aspects. Moreover, it was believed that both men and gods could, at certain times, actually change themselves into powerful animals.

Aztec Black Stone Skull - DK.052

Circa: 13th Century AD to 15th Century AD
Dimensions: 6.5 ″(16.5cm) high x 6 ″(15.2cm) wide x 7.75 ″(19.7cm) depth
Collection: Mesoamerica

$240,000.00

Aztec Black Stone Skull - CK.0830

Origin: Central Mexico
Circa: 13th Century AD to 15th Century AD
Dimensions: 7" (17.8cm) high x 6" (15.2cm) wide
Additional Information: Preusser Lab Test

$180,000.00

The Aztec civilization is perhaps the most celebrated of the ancient Meso-American cultures. Their empire stretched throughout northern Mexico and was surpassed in size only by that of the Incans. Tenochtitlan (modern- day Mexico City) was the center of their religious and political systems. The city was composed of a group of island located in the center of Lake Texcoco, earning it the nickname 'Venice of the New World'. By the time the Spanish Conquistadors arrived in the early 16th Century, led by the infamous Hernan Cortes, Tenochtitlan was by far larger than any city they could have seen in Europe. Today, the Aztec are remembered for their grand temple complex ruins, for their intricate calendar system, and for the few examples of their art that survive today. Aztec art was primarily ecclesiastical and is renowned for its powerful nature. Highly adept at working with stone, the Aztec artists created artworks that were both grand in scale, as evidenced in their temple architecture, and relatively small in size. Like many cultures, the Aztecs believed that many animals had supernatural symbolic associations. Therefore, although the Aztec gods were usually visualized in human form, most gods also had animal aspects. Moreover, it was believed that both men and gods could, at certain times, actually change themselves into powerful animals.

Aztec/Colonial Rock Crystal - CK.0856

Origin: Mexico
Circa: 1400 AD to 1600 AD
Dimensions: 5.25" (13.3cm) high x 4" (10.2cm) wide x 6" (15.2cm) depth
Collection: Pre-Columbian

$16,000.00

The Aztec civilization is perhaps the most celebrated of the ancient Meso-American cultures. Their empire stretched throughout northern Mexico and was surpassed in size only by that of the Incans. Tenochtitlan (modern-day Mexico City) was the center of their religious and political systems. The city was composed of a group of island located in the center of Lake Texcoco, earning it the nickname "Venice of the New World." By the time the Spanish Conquistadors arrived in the early 16th Century, led by the infamous Hernan Cortes, Tenochtitlan was by far larger than any city they could have seen in Europe. Today, the Aztec are remembered for their grand temple complex ruins, for their intricate calendar system, and for the few examples of their art that survive today. Aztec art was primarily ecclesiastical and is renowned for its powerful nature. Highly adept at working with stone, the Aztec artists created artworks that were both grand in scale, as evidenced in their temple architecture, and relatively small in size. Like many cultures, the Aztecs believed that many animals had supernatural symbolic associations. Therefore, although the Aztec gods were usually visualized in human form, most gods also had animal aspects. Moreover, it was believed that both men and gods could, at certain times, actually change themselves into powerful animals.

Bhairava (The Wrathful) is one of the more terrifying aspects of Shiva, the Hindu creator god. He is often depicted with frowning, angry eyes and sharp, tiger's teeth and flaming hair; stark naked except for garlands of skulls and a coiled snake about his neck. Often represented with multiple limbs, he most frequently carries a noose, trident, drum, and skull. Bhairava is Shiva at his most terrifying, at his most fearful. He may be understood as a particular manifestation, or emanation of Shiva, or as Shiva displaying himself at a very high level. In some myths, Shiva created Bhairava as an extension of himself, in order to chastise Brahma. Bhairava is the embodiment of fear, and it is said that those who meet him must confront the source of their own fears. His name describes the effect he has upon those who behold him, as it derives from the word *bhiru*, which means to become fearful – of feeling great fear.

This wooden sculpture is a perfect representation of Bhairava. Intricately carved by a master sculptor, he has a fierce expression with three bulging round eyes. Stylized flames wrap around his head, also representing his fiery eyebrows and moustache. A hole has been pierced through his mouth in between his sharp fangs. His jewellery is composed of serpents: two coiled snakes represent his earrings while he wears a snake as a necklace. Perhaps even more intimidating is the diadem that crowns his head. A central head of a bodhisattva watches over from above, his peacefulness opposed to the series of skulls entwined with a snake. Represented from his torso up, he forms a mudra with one hand while holding either a drum or a decapitated skull in his other. Bhairava is a vision extracted from our worst nightmare; he plays with our fears and taunts our innermost weaknesses. However, even in his dread, he offers us hope, such as the hope for rebirth after the destruction of the world.

Wooden Stele of Bhairava - PF.5792

Origin: Nepal
Circa: 15th Century AD to 16th Century AD
Dimensions: 31.5" (80.0cm) high

$24,000.00

The representation of Shiva's head in the middle of this deity's hairdress, and his third eye (urna) in the middle of his forehead, confirm this image as that of Shiva in one of his major wrathful avataras, Bhairava. Bhairava is an ancient Hindu god, possibly even predating his Shiva's incarnation, a fearful destroyer who would take pleasure in the destruction of various demons and other evil beings. This spirit, whose name literally means 'terrible', emanates from Shiva's samhara-murti forms and both Hindus and Buddhists (conceived in the form of Mahakala), try to appease him. This large and impressive head of Bhairava probably originally adorned an entrance to a shrine, a familiar feature of Nepali religious architecture. Most probably this face was also designed to be used in processions.

His face is adorned with a crown with diadems, snakes, skulls, strings of pearls; the central diadem bearing an image (head) of Shiva. His two large circular earrings are both depicting snakes following the outline of the circle with their heads raised towards the god. He is depicted with flaming locks of hair, a large urna (sign of illumination), a curly beard, a moustache, large eyebrows, and a snake sliding around his neck on top of his elaborate necklace. The worship of serpents or snakes (nagas) has been prevalent in Nepal from a very early time. These benevolent deities are connected with Shiva, being part of his terrifying aspect and symbolize the cycles of time.

Bhairava also features a small circular opening in his full mouth, through which a pipe was probably inserted to serve consecrated beer to his devotees. Indeed, in the Newari culture of Nepal, on certain festival days a mask of Bhairava called hathwandya ('beer-pour god') is set up and beer or spirits are poured from a tube projecting from a hole in the mouth. Yet this Dionysian type of festival is unique to the Newari culture in Kathmandu.

The art of the Malla period reflects the stylistic characteristics and artistic taste of the monarchs, and can be considered a highlight in the art history of Nepal. The high quality of the carving and the lively imagination exemplify the skills of the Newari masters during that period. Typical elements are the pronounced and detailed structure of the head, the shape of the tiara with circular diadems decorated with lotus motifs and jewellery, the shape of the earrings and necklace, both decorated with the same motifs and pearls.

The importance of this impressive head is shown by the consistency of high quality pronounced carving. All details are captured within a strong and simple conceptualization with the flaming hair serving as a frame for the main shape. Bhairava is portrayed with a round and lively face, expressing an amazing power. His large circular open eyes and smiling mouth are part of his twofold manifestation; on one hand he is the great destroyer expressing his terrifying aspects needed in order to accomplish his task, on the other hand he reveals an open and friendly humanity as he feels compassion with his devotees. The superbly carved features and the directness of the expressive energies he radiates, make this head of Bhairava among the finest examples known.

Nepalese Wooden Mask of Bhairava - LO.604

Origin: Nepal
Circa: 1500 AD to 1700 AD
Dimensions: 14" (35.6cm) high x 8.25" (21.0cm) wide

£24,000.00

Painted Skull Mask - SF.058

Origin: Nepal
Circa: 1800 AD to 1900 AD
Dimensions: 7.15" (18.2cm) high x 5.75" (14.6cm) wide

£1,500.00

Bhairava is known as the ferocious divinity: the wide-open staring eyes demonstrate 'the terrifying one' and his wild and uncontrollable nature. His connections to Shiva are shown in the serpent imagery of his earrings, necklace and headdress, by the upstanding ringlets of matted hair, the third eye set in his forehead, the crescent moon in his hair and in the skull imagery of the headdress. He is especially popular as a divinity in Nepal and northern India where he is renowned for the beheading of a Brahmin. Not just an ordinary Brahmin, but the god Brahma himself. The legend is that Bhairava was generated miraculously from the anger experienced by Shiva as he was forced to listen to the vain boasting of Brahma. Immediately created Bhairava sprang forward and cut off one of the five heads of Brahma and ever since Brahma has been recognised by his four rather than five heads As penance for his crime Bhairava was condemned to endlessly wander with the fifth head of Brahma stuck to the palm of his hand. Only when he reached Benares, the great confessional where all sins are washed away, did the head of Brahma fall away freeing him of his crime. Frequently portrayed as a young ascetic with wild hair accompanied by his dog 'Vahana', he is known as an excitable, dangerous and ambivalent divinity whose emblem is the human skull or 'Kapala'. An extreme Shaiva sect known as the 'Kapalika' emulate his wandering penance, using a human skull as a begging bowl for alms. They deliberately indulge in contrary behaviour to demonstrate their passage beyond the difference of opposite. Like Bhairava they believe they will reach liberation through the grace of Shiva.

Nepalese Bhairava Mask - SF.061

Circa: 1800 AD to 1900 AD
Dimensions: 13.5" (34.3cm) high x 12" (30.5cm) wide
Medium: Metal

£9,900.00

Netsuke sculptures are designed to attach the tops of sagemono (containers) – which contained personal items – to the obi (sashes) used to tie the kimono or kosode. They are therefore essentially utilitarian objects, but since the 17th century craftsmen and artists have taken great pleasure in carving ever more complex and detailed themes onto netsuke so that they are now recognised as one of Japan's most notable indigenous art forms. There are various different forms – over and above the thousands of designs – of which the in-the-round carving of kataborinetsuke (lit. "sculpture netsuke) is the best-known. All forms of ivory and bone are used.

Intricately detailed and anatomically correct, this miniature skull is a stunning testament to the remarkable skills of the carver. The is a two character signature on the base of the back of the skull, revealing that the sculptor was deservedly proud of his fine workmanship. This magnificent netsuke is a reminder of the transience of life.

Ivory Netsuke Depicting a Skull - CK.0188

Origin: Japan
Circa: 19th Century AD
Dimensions: 1" (2.5cm) high x .75" (1.9cm) wide x 1" (2.5cm) depth

$3,600.00

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